

Introduction to creative activities for running Reading Ahead for prisoners with ESOL

This should be read alongside our general guidance for running Reading Ahead in prisons – see [Resources page for Reading Ahead](#). Please also see the six separate Creative Activities.

Introduction

The Reading Agency's Reading Ahead programme is designed to inspire less confident readers to develop an enjoyment of reading at the same time as improving literacy skills. More than 275,000 adults and young people have taken part in the scheme since 2008 in public libraries, adult learning, colleges, workplaces and prisons. In 2016/17 at least 12,000 prisoners took part in 108 prisons across the UK.

Reading Ahead challenges participants to choose six reads and record their views in a diary. On completion each receives a certificate and a mini-dictionary/thesaurus provided by the charity Give a Book. Participants in Reading Ahead can read all kinds of text including poems, song lyrics, magazine and newspaper articles as well as books of all types as long as they are challenging themselves. The programme provides an ideal starting-point for participants to engage, or re-engage, with reading, giving them the confidence to identify as 'readers'. This is particularly true of those with ESOL needs who want to practise their new-found language skills and learn more about a different culture.

"ESOL needs present a very real challenge for how offenders/ex-offenders experience prison life and have access to rehabilitation opportunities both during incarceration and after release." 'A Prison within a Prison', The Bell Foundation, February 2015

Partnerships

In most prisons Reading Ahead activity is led by the prison library. In order to reach those who have been identified as having ESOL needs, a partnership with education is essential. As with any other partnership it important to ensure that:

- shared aims and outcomes are agreed at the outset;
- senior managers have bought in to the idea;
- there is a straightforward way to collect the data that everyone needs.

There is a downloadable A4 advocacy leaflet on the [Resources page for Reading Ahead](#) for promoting the programme to new partners and colleagues in prisons. This is not intended as a publicity leaflet for participants.

It will be crucial to the success of the partnership that you have agreed some shared objectives appropriate for prisoners with ESOL. These might be:

- to help learners improve reading, writing, speaking and listening skills in English;

- to improve interdepartmental cooperation;
- to increase library membership and use among ESOL learners;
- to inspire more learners to talk and write about their reading experiences;
- to make it easier for providers to integrate reading for pleasure into their work with learners;
- to start a reading group or other shared reading activity;
- to link with other reading initiatives suitable for ESOL learners.

Tailoring Reading Ahead for prisoners with ESOL

Reading Ahead offers a structure that works well within an ESOL class with the support of the library to provide a choice of reading materials.

The programme can be introduced by the tutor as an opportunity for learners to extend their reading skills and vocabulary at the same time as enjoying a story or gaining some new information. A better reading ability will build confidence and reduce isolation and dependence on other foreign nationals. It will also increase prisoners' capacity to move on within the prison regime, i.e. find work.

Activity to support Reading Ahead can be integrated into lesson plans on a regular basis.

"The students really liked the diaries and being able to spend time reading in class. We found the best way of making Reading Ahead work was giving the learners 30 minutes in each session to read whatever they had chosen. They started reading much faster than I'd thought, gaining in confidence and completed much quicker. Before we had tried it in their own time and they either forgot, were distracted or couldn't get something to read."

Tutor, HMP Moorland

Reading in your cell is often hard if you have to concentrate over the blare of a TV. If you have to sound out the words or if you need a dictionary every few minutes, it might look too obvious that you're doing 'homework'.

Encouraging learners to discuss their reading is an important class activity. It gives them an opportunity to use their speaking skills which are often better than their reading and writing skills.

"Always ask your students what they have read for their diaries. You might get some surprising answers. It also gives them chance to recommend books to each other."

Tutor, HMP Downview

Choosing what to read

Tutors may have some books to offer their class but this is an ideal opportunity for learners to use the prison library. Ensure that all learners understand how the library is managed, the names for the different sections and where they can find books for their level.

Learners may ask to read something in their mother tongue in order to take part in Reading Ahead. This is fine as long as they write their thoughts on what they read in English. Sometimes allowing learners to use a book in their own language gives them a chance to engage in conversation at a higher level. Other times it will be that the learner has chosen material that feels familiar or uses familiar language, i.e. true crime.

"I never knew there would be books in my language in the library."

HMP Downview

There is no set of books for Reading Ahead and no stipulation that only books can be used. The whole aim is to engage people in text and that may be best achieved through poetry, song lyrics, magazine or newspaper articles, or very short books.

In 2017 we worked with ESOL specialists from NATECLA (National Association for Teaching English and Community Languages to Adults) to identify a list of titles that might appeal to ESOL learners from Entry 1 to Level 1. This year our prisons consultant David Kendall has trialled these books and introduced other titles and publishers into the mix. This has provided us with a supplement of a further 18 titles. These lists, together with guidance, can be found on the [Resources page for Reading Ahead](#).

The aim is for all prison libraries catering for ESOL learners to use this as a basis for their library stock for this audience.

"Having a range of books on display in the library really helped. It was easy to direct learners to without making them feel particularly marked out." HMYOI Brinsford

Ideas to support reading for pleasure

The following activities are designed to be used with ESOL learners either in class or in the library. They can be used with learners at a range of levels. **Please also see the six separate Creative Activities on our [Resources page for Reading Ahead](#).**

In class settings

Making reading visible

It's useful to have a display of the kinds of books learners might want from the library. It doesn't need to be the actual books. You can copy the covers and sample pages so the learners can see the level of the text.

It helps if we already know

Learners are more likely to pick up a book if they feel they already know something about its subject or its author, eg books about Nelson Mandela or The Beatles.

Song lyrics

These are perfect for Reading Ahead. Use whatever learners are currently listening to or find familiar. Songs have the advantage that they are likely to have been seen in context on TV and learners are familiar with the particular styles and English used.

Find a film

Identify a film that most learners have seen and get them to tell the story a line at a time. This can be as simple or as complex as it needs to be, eg *Rocky - Unknown boxer is chosen to fight the reigning world champion.*

Create a story

Display 30 or more words you want students to use with confidence. Each learner in turn has to add a line to a story using one of more of the words in the display. An example of a first line might be: *"He knew it was going to be a bad day...."*

In the library

Take six covers

Name each thing on the cover. Each student needs to say, in one sentence, what they imagine the book might be about. This works well with several of the titles on the booklist.

Life of Pi

Uprising

Space Ark

Next Door to Love

Lost at Sea

Fear in the Dark

Books from other countries

Ask which country each learner comes from and look for it on a world map. Find a book from the shelves about each country.

Your words/My words

Ask each learner to translate a book title from the list into their own language and show the group.

What's Wrong with Me?

Memory Man

Respect

One Shot

Snake